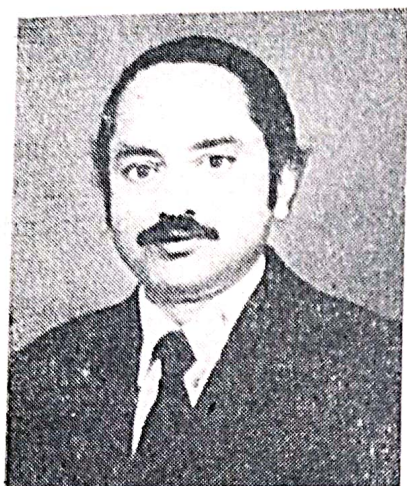




PRODUCTION OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS : PITFALLS AND PROBLEMS

— C.N. RAO*

Jawaharlal Nehru was once asked if the government was shifting the National Library from Calcutta to New Delhi. He was surprised and replied, "Who will read books in Delhi?" Nehru was a great writer and a lover of books. It was largely due to his inspiration and efforts that institutions like the National Book Trust, Children's Book Trust, Sahitya Akademi, National Council of Educational Research and Training etc. were set up.

His sense of disappointment about the people of Delhi in the matter of reading of books may have been justified, because, in the midst of his multifarious activities and obligations, he could hardly find time to spend with authors and book lovers. He would have been happy to know that this Seminar is being held in Delhi, amidst a galaxy of book lovers.

Lack of interest in reading is not confined to Delhi only. A survey in West Germany, one of the most advanced nations in the world and which has the honour of hosting the largest International Book Fair in the world (Frankfurt Book

Fair), has showed that 84 per cent of teenagers spend hours and hours in front of TV sets everyday, while only 27 per cent of them once pick up a book. According to this survey, 45 per cent of people in the age group 12-29 almost never read a book. The survey also revealed that 71.4 per cent watched TV every day while only 12.6 per cent never touched a book.

TV is now supplemented with VCR/VCP and even if we do not have round-the-clock TV transmission in India (Thank God), the video parlour at the street corner rents out video cassettes for just Rs. 5.00. Although statistics about book reading vs. TV are not available for India, it will not require a great deal of imagination to reach a conclusion.

Children's books and stories for children are nothing new to India. There has been a long tradition—both oral and written/printed. *Panchtantra*, *Hitopadesh*, *Kathasaritsagar*, *Tales of Birbal* and *Tenaliram* are all a part of the tradition and are still popular throughout this vast country of multiple languages and cul-

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tures. It is true that in the past, education and learning were the preserves of a select few. Oral teaching—learning was emphasised and followed, perhaps because of the stress on the correct pronunciation and the *guru-shishya parampara*. The impact of printing was therefore slow. According to Prof. V.R. Anantha Murthy, "It all began with the invention of alphabets and consequently, of printing, then of the novel and then of the film. So, *mantra* became verse and poetry, the sacred oral became the secular written, the palm leaf special of *Sastra-Dan* became the pocket book and finally the video cassette . . ."

These have always been in opposite camps and it is a never-ending struggle. Inventions and innovations have changed the way of life—for better or for worse, be it the wheel or the dynamite. Today, the Computer, TV and Video have certainly made their impact and if reading has suffered as a consequence, it has to be accepted. But it should also be accepted that the setback in reading can only be temporary. The book has withstood many such onslaughts—radio, films, etc.—but survived.

Children's books occupy a special place in the field of publishing, similar to the child in a family. Owing to this, the inputs, the production and marketing have to be different.

To begin with, a good, captivating story, supported by attractive, preferably multi-coloured illustrations, is essential. Imaginative designing and layout and good, clean printing are the other requisites. Strong, smooth paper of good quality and strong binding which can withstand wear, and tear and occasional rough handling are also necessary. In other words, almost the best of everything is required.

Owing to the above factors, the cost of production of children's books tends to be high. Since the print orders commanded

by such books are rarely very large, the unit costs and therefore, the sale prices are prohibitive. If the quality of illustrations, paper, printing, designing or binding is sacrificed to reduce the cost of production, the end product is shabby and hardly commands a market. This is a vicious circle much like the proverbial housewife's budget. She wants only the best for her family, but often has to fight against spiralling prices and fixed income. Many traditional Indian housewives balance the budget by personal sacrifice—self-denial.

But in the field of children's book publishing, who will play the role of the housewife? Neither the printer, nor the paper supplier nor the bookseller is prepared to sacrifice even a part of his share. The axe therefore falls on the author and the illustrator, who are poorly paid. This is one reason for the dearth of exclusive writers and illustrators for children's books.

This exploitation of author and illustrator, the truly creative people in the development of children's books, is not a new phenomenon. This has been talked about and discussed for so long that we have become insensitive just as we have become insensitive to violence in today's society, which is also due to excessive media-exposure. Avijit Pathak said, "We live in an age that justifies violence." Similarly, in the publishing world, have we accepted that exploitation of the illustrator and the author is justified?

NEW TECHNOLOGY

Modern technological developments in the field of printing technology, in the form of photocomposers, lasersetters, scanners, automatic cameras, multi-coloured offset and gravure printing machines, in-line varnishing, computerised three-knife trimmers, perfect binders, laminators etc. have revolutionised printing. While these have immensely helped in reducing the produc-

tion time and improving the quality, the reduction in costs has not been that pronounced. Even today, the conventional composing, processing, printing and binding are cheaper if time is not taken into consideration. This is the dilemma of the publisher. He can neither ignore the new technology, nor can he afford it easily. But, with growing competition, the costs are bound to come down, particularly in the pre-press section.

But throes of change are already visible. Lasersetting, more popularly known as DTP, is making big inroads, particularly in English language setting. It has not only pushed the recently-introduced photocomposing (which, amusingly, is now referred to as 'conventional' photocomposing) to the edge, but has brought composing, page make-up and lay-out to the confines of the publisher's office. The output is about 40-50 per cent cheaper than photocomposing outputs. If the DTP output is obtained on transparent film, even camera-work can be dispensed with. The additional advantage of DTP systems is the availability of software for graphics. This will be a boon to the illustrators. Scanners attached to the DTP systems, which are now expected, will facilitate the merging of illustrators—line, half-tone and even colour with the text.

Spell-check software is already available so that spelling mistakes are almost eliminated. An on-line picture dictionary is also on the cards, as are the voice-activated computers. The latter will completely eliminate manual key-boarding, often a time-consuming process.

All these would enable the author and the illustrator/designer to sit together and produce colour-separated positives in no time and without visiting a printing press.

While these developments would reduce the cost of production to some extent, the costliest ingredient of a book for children

is paper. Paper of poor quality can irreparably mar the best of illustrations. Unfortunately, the situation is positively alarming. Good quality paper, if at all available, is prohibitively expensive, upsetting all budgetary calculations. There are no easy solutions. Either the paper will have to be imported on easy terms or part of the indigenous production will have to be earmarked exclusively for children's books. Both are difficult and beyond the direct control of the publishers.

Attempts have been made to produce 'synthetic paper' in which wood pulp is not used at all. This paper is almost tear-resistant and accepts varieties of printing but with special inks. This paper will be suitable for children's books, but at present, it is quite expensive.

It is well known that the unit cost of a book has an inverse ratio to the print order. But, printing a large number of copies of a book for children has always been risky because of the uncertain market. Institutional buying of children's books was the main hope for this 'industry,' but in the near-absence of school libraries and insufficient mobile libraries, public libraries etc., mass production of children's books seemed a distant dream. Following the New Education Policy of 1986, two significant schemes have been launched by the Government. These are: Operation Blackboard (OB) and National Library Mission (NLM). Both the schemes have provided opportunities to publishers of children's books to produce quality books which have an assured market. Under OB, the production standards have been quantified, perhaps, for the first time. Imaginatively implemented, these scheme would go a long way in the growth of children's book publishing. The cooperation and active participation of publishers and librarians are, of course, essential for the success of these schemes.